II: Voices From Nigerian Prison Yards

Inside Nigerian Prison Yards: Through the Eyes of Human Rights Activism
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These reflections emerge from the daily journal I kept during my time as a human rights activist inside Nigerian prisons. The experiences I had were inundated with visual brutality, mental stimulation, and political conversations. In attempting to keep myself grounded, and in trying to grasp the larger picture, I found myself creating mental snapshots of the details that eventually combined to form a mosaic that made sense to me, according to the things I saw, heard, and thought while I sat inside prison yards and conversed with Nigerian prisoners. These words are an attempt to present that mosaic.

A long dirt road begins with a casual barrel of a gun, watching the "boundary," not only allowing access to "outsiders" but also allowing selective exit to "insiders." The few "outsiders" who ask and are allowed to step past those guns and over the invisible, mysterious line are faced with tall concrete walls inflicting more visible boundaries and more gun barrels illustrating the visual and violent infliction of control. All boundaries within the Nigeria Prison Service grounds are accentuated by the binding green gates built within the concrete walls, meant to function as a point of transition between the two worlds: the world inside Nigerian prisons and the world outside of them.

The walls I see before me every time I enter a prison, anywhere in the world, are not just walls. They are symbols of degradation and violence, they are statements of disregard and humiliation, they are perpetrators of myth and fear, and above all, they are clear, concrete representations of the inhumanity created for the "sake of humanity."

As I step beyond the gates and enter the world of prison in Nigeria, I am faced with green prison officials' uniforms trying to maintain order and control upon blue convicted prisoners' uniforms. It is easy to look beyond

the colours and see that it is simply a world of men and women trying to keep other men and women behind the walls, and in that, working to control all physical, mental, and spiritual undertakings. Colours mark power, not people: green uniforms taking shifts to watch, monitor, control, and punish the blue uniforms. Void of colour, it becomes a group of people struggling for power and control.

While I was in Nigeria from October 2000 to November 2002, there were 142 prisons holding approximately 55,000 prisoners, 62 percent of whom were awaiting trial. While 20,000 prisoners had been convicted inside court, approximately 35,000 prisoners were imprisoned without legal representation or the chance to appear in court. Those 35,000 people did not always have prison uniforms[6]; they wore the clothes that they were arrested in, and as the years went by, whatever clothes they were able to get from those around them. I met prisoners who have served up to ten years awaiting trial, and if convicted, were not given "time served" recognition. An ex-prisoner I worked with at the PRAWA office, a man I knew as Papa, often spoke about the eight years he spent awaiting trial for a drug offence and the ten years he was sentenced to serve. He spent eighteen years in prison.

It is important to note the differences in conditions between awaiting trial and convicted prisoners. It was visibly clear that awaiting trial prisoners are the most under-nourished and mal-treated prisoners in most Nigerian prison yards; in addition, the amount of time spent in lockdown is much higher in comparison with convicted prisoners. In Kirikiri Medium Security Prison, about 2,000 prisoners were awaiting trial, about 700 were convicted; warehousing approximately 2,700 prisoners. Kirikiri Medium Security Prison was originally built to warehouse about 700 people. Many awaiting trial prisoners in Kirikiri Medium Security Prison stated that they were allowed to leave their overcrowded cell blocks (holding up to 77 people in one room) once a week for one hour. This, according to prison guards, was due to the lack of resources and staff to handle the thousands of prisoners they had in custody. Also, the amount of food awaiting trial prisoners receive is much smaller in comparison with convicted prisoners, who already do not get sufficient servings.

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[6] In all male prisons, I did not see any awaiting trial uniforms; in Kirikiri Women's prison, the awaiting trial prisoners ironically wore green (the Nigerian Prison Service uniform colour), while the convicted prisoners wore blue.

In addition to the obvious injustice of one's loss of liberty, *and* the loss of that liberty without the chance to defend oneself, *and* the immense amount of time seized and forever lost, awaiting trial prisoners were subject to harsh living conditions because they are not properly represented in the Nigerian Prison Service budget; since they have not been convicted in court they do not hold official prisoner status. Prison officials often claimed no option other than to warehouse them in overcrowded, unsanitary, inhumane conditions, with scarce access to basic food provisions, clean drinking water, or proper clothing and too much access to physical disease, abuse, mental degradation, and death. In almost all Nigerian prisons, death in custody is common. There are no official statistics available but I unofficially witnessed many convicted prisoners assigned the task of carrying out awaiting trial prisoners' corpses (sometimes decayed) on rusted stretchers, wrapped in grey blankets: many of these "casualties" are young; all the ones I saw had never been convicted.

Most of my direct contact with the world inside Nigerian prison walls had been with both convicted and awaiting trial prisoners. In the end, a prison is a prison and a prisoner is a prisoner. Over the years, as I have entered prisons in different countries it has become clear to me that many (not all) of the people behind prison walls have harmed and violated other people. But it is just as clear to me that many of the people outside prison walls have done the same; maybe under different circumstances, maybe to different people and maybe at a different level (be it larger, through corporate and war-centred violence, or smaller, through individual means), but nonetheless, they have done it. It is crucial to note that the corporate executives and state leaders of this world who are responsible for millions of deaths and injuries rarely see the inside walls of prison barriers. The penal system has clearly been created by the powerful to keep the powerless under control: illusions of community safety and necessity of such a structure function to keep the masses frightened of each other and sometimes of the penal structure, allowing those in power freedom to go about their business with little resistance and questioning. On a micro level, the conditions that Nigerian prisoners live and die in are atrocious. On a macro level, the conditions under which the penal system exists[7] are just as atrocious, brutal, and unacceptable.

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[7]   Implementing social structures that perpetuate cycles of oppressive, invasive behavior, fuel fear, justify violence by inflicting violence, etc.

I have recently become more aware of the fact that conflict is a function of human interaction. Endless numbers of societies encounter violent interactions against each other; every society faces hostility among its own people, every community faces tension between its neighbours, every household will have friction among its residents. The indisputable state of the universal human reality is full of conflict and upheaval. Among individuals (but almost never among corporations or powerhouse states) when this state of affairs reaches a point of violence it becomes simplified and packaged into a word — a mysterious, scientific, measurable, professional word — that word is "crime." This "packaging" is convenient for the state and is accepted by the people. I have come to see how this allows penal structures to continue to be imposed upon the majority of the powerless, leaving the majority of the powerful immune and "safe." Within the same "crime" category, acts of defiance, survival, or self-defense against the state are linked to "criminalized" acts. Actions that are not violent (i.e., drug use) become one with actions that are. Certain populations get targeted in this selective use of "criminalization" and while different states target different populations whom they find threatening or whom they have come to recognize as the "surplus" who do not have a working role within their political and social agendas, these populations come to carry the scapegoat role: they become targets of fear and aid in diversion from larger schemes of greater oppressions.

The thousands of acts and millions of people who fall within the category of "criminal" in the context of their respective nations eventually get dumped into the human warehouses we call prison. My opportunities to meet those people whom the state has formally denounced unfit to live within the physical boundaries of its communities have been life changing and eye opening. In Nigeria, I have been faced with their malnourished, disease infected, de-humanized, unsanitary, violent realities; through their words and through their struggles, I have been able to learn about but still never fully grasp the experiences of imprisonment.

Too often, I have left the prison and wondered at the logic of denouncing violence and violations among people by implementing a violent and violating structure. Does it make sense to reject people and render them "unfit" to function in the community in order to encourage and "help" them to function more productively in that same community? Is it productive to

rely on such an oppressive and counterproductive structure in attempts to reduce violence and build peace? Is it at all safe to brutalize those people in our community who have shown their willingness to brutalize others? And where is the sense in brutalizing them in the name of "community safety"? It does make sense within the social political context of states, corporations, and social control, but it does not make sense within the context of community safety and cohesion. The average citizen (the majority of each country's population) is vulnerable to criminalization while the minority powerful population benefit from "immunity." In the same sense, the majority of the world's population residing in the "developing world" live in harsh conditions while the minority in the "developed" world live in comfort. As a microcosm of society, prisons represent these problems; like a magnifying glass, the penal system's institutions present a clear and concise picture of larger social ills, both nationally and internationally.

One hopes that in time, more people will open their eyes and see the reality of the penal structure: recognizing that it perpetuates violence, realizing that maybe the societies with the highest crime rates have the most prisons not because prisons and the penal system exist to react to crime, but come to see the penal system and all its institutions as perpetrators of violence. Prisons cage, dehumanize, and segregate people. It is an institution that poisons all that it touches, and fundamentally encourages the community to fear and loathe all who were once imprisoned if they are ever released. One cannot help but wonder about the logic and the reasons behind the sustenance of such degrading and dehumanizing structures. I find myself looking at the roots of such a structure and questioning its maintenance through centuries of failure. My work in West Africa helped me better understand the colonial, imperialist roots of the penal structure and brought forth many thoughts on the important role it continues to play in the capitalist and "democratic" world we currently live in.

From an individual perspective, putting aside the structural debates, I have come to this conclusion: there has to be a more humane way to appeal to people's humanity. If we continue to separate and avenge, I fear future generations will be born into the same violent society I was born into — a society that cannot function in harmony or allow its citizens to function in a tolerable and balanced manner. I do not fear "criminals." I fear governments (and now corporations) that will always react by locking up and continue to

benefit from such "sanctions." I fear a future full of people who will never discover or experience true poverty alleviation, or the positive capacities that can be achieved within the elimination of classism, racism, sexism, ageism, tribalism, and the power dynamics of implemented structured hierarchies. I fear the masses may never know how to fight economic and social injustices because too many people are too busy fearing and focusing on common street crime and individual conflicts.

I fear we will constantly be stuck in this superficial cycle of "crime prevention," never embracing the realities of harm reduction. It is that same cycle that allows the rich and the powerful to define social problems and it is the dizziness of that cycle that keeps the rest from stepping back and questioning the social structures that divert attention form the real issues: the uneven distribution of wealth, the exploitation of land resources and environmental destruction, the wars that kill millions and the corporations that exploit billions, economic degradations, and the perpetually exploitative control of too many nations and entire continents by a small number of historically colonialist nations. Above all, I fear that those who benefit from these inhumane structures have too much to lose in terms of material and political wealth to ever allow this degrading and violent situation to change. I often find myself fighting off the dizziness and despair that are the side-effects of that cycle.

My work with Nigerian prisoners has shown me the humanity that can shine in the dark corridors of inhumanity. I have seen their individual potentials being stifled, I have smelled their fear of not surviving, I have sensed their lonely and desolate thoughts and I have listened to their stories of violence and their dreams of hope. Over the years, I have come to realize that the "criminals" of my society are simply people the state has labelled as such. If given the proper opportunity they can not only function within the boundaries of our community, but can contribute to the expansion of those boundaries by giving insight into the ability of the human spirit to lash out and hurt as well as its perseverance when faced with threats. There are people behind those walls who can provide insight into the endurance of the human mind's potential in overcoming isolation, in overthrowing degradation, in capturing the true essence of pain, and in displaying the strength to survive against all odds.

I ask that you open your eyes to the realities of the men and women in Nigerian prisons who do not often have the opportunity to tell their tales

of oppression or the chance to share their experiences with the criminal injustice system. I hope that their struggles and their stories will emphasize the contradictions of penal reform efforts in Nigeria, not only in presenting their struggles within an inhumane system but in reminding the "developed" world that they too live within the same degrading, dehumanizing, and violent systems. Geographically, it is different, but in essence, in goals and in structure, it is the same colonial penal system. The "human rights" efforts funded through "developed" nations' charitable funds will do little more than better equip the existing Nigerian Penal System to hide and justify these brutalities. It is the structure that is inhumane, and in the land of extremes, in the Nigeria that I experienced, that inhumanity had nowhere to hide.